Nancy Spero

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Nancy Spero (August 24, 1926 – October 18, 2009) was an American visual artist. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Spero lived for much of her life in New York City. She married and collaborated with artist Leon Golub.[1] As both artist and activist, Nancy Spero had a career that spanned fifty years. She is known for her continuous engagement with contemporary political, social, and cultural concerns. Spero chronicled wars and apocalyptic violence as well as articulating visions of ecstatic rebirth and the celebratory cycles of life. Her complex network of collective and individual voices was a catalyst for the creation of her figurative lexicon representing women from prehistory to the present in such epic-scale paintings and collage on paper as *Torture of Women* (1976), *Notes in Time on Women* (1979) and *The First Language* (1981). In 2010, *Notes in Time* was posthumously reanimated as a digital scroll in the online magazine *Triple Canopy*.[2] Spero has had a number of retrospective exhibitions at major museums.[3]

Nancy Spero

Nancy Spero, in her New York Studio, 1973

Born	Nancy Spero August 24, 1926 Cleveland, Ohio
Died	October 18, 2009 (aged 83) New York City, New York
Nationality	American
Education	Art Institute of Chicago
Known for	Painting, Printmaking, Collage, Feminist art, Feminist art movement in the United States
Spouse(s)	Leon Golub

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Early years [edit source]

Spero was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1926. A year later her family moved to Chicago, where she grew up. After graduating from New Trier High School, she studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and graduated in 1949. Among Spero's peers at the Art Institute was a young GI who had returned from service in World War II, Leon Golub. Spero and Golub exhibited at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago as part of the group the Monster Roster.[4] After graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago, Spero continued to study painting in Paris at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts and at the Atelier of Andre Lhote, an early Cubist painter, teacher and critic. Soon after her return to the United States in 1950, she married Leon Golub, and the two artists settled in Chicago.

From 1956 to 1957, Spero and Golub lived and collaborated in Italy, while raising their three sons. Spero and Golub were equally committed to exploring a modernist representation of the human form, with its narratives and art historical resonances, even as Abstract Expressionism was becoming the dominant idiom. In Florence and Ischia, Spero became intrigued by the format, style and mood of Etruscan and Roman frescoes and sarcophagi which would have influence on her later work. Finding a more varied, inclusive and international atmosphere in Europe than in the New York art world of the time, Spero and her family moved to Paris, living there from 1959 to 1964. Spero's third son was born in Paris, and the artist had major solo exhibitions in Paris at Galerie Breteau in 1962, 1964, and 1968. During this period, Spero painted a series titled *Black Paintings* depicting themes including mothers and children, lovers, prostitutes, and hybrid, human-animal forms. This collection of works has a more personal meaning for her, rather than political.

Later years [edit source]

Spero and Golub returned to New York in 1964, where the couple remained to live and work. The Vietnam War was raging and the Civil Rights Movement was exploding. Affected by images of the war broadcast nightly on television and the unrest and violence evident in the streets, Spero began her *War Series* from 1966 to 1970. These small gouache and inks on paper, executed rapidly, represented the obscenity and destruction of war. The *War Series* is among the most sustained and powerful group of works in the genre of history painting that condemns war and its real and lasting consequences.[*citation needed*]

An activist and early feminist, Spero was a member of the Art Workers Coalition (1968–69),[5] Women Artists in Revolution (1969), and Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists (1971)[6] the work of which developed into the first women's cooperative gallery, A.I.R. Gallery (Artists in Residence) in SoHo, of which she was a founding member. It was during this period that Spero completed her "Artaud Paintings" (1969–70), finding her artistic "voice" and developing her signature scroll paintings, the *Codex Artaud* (1971–1972), in which she directly quoted the writings of the poet and playwright Antonin Artaud. Uniting text and image, printed on long scrolls of paper, glued end-to-end and tacked on the walls of A.I.R., Spero violated the formal presentation, choice of valued medium and scale of framed paintings. Although her collaged and painted scrolls were Homeric in both scope and depth, the artist shunned the grandiose in content as well as style, relying instead on intimacy and immediacy, while also revealing the continuum of shocking political realities underlying enduring myths. In a 2008 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail* with publisher Phong Bui, Spero says of her early identification with Artaud: "For me, the spoken words were part of the body, as if whatever I was trying to paint, and my own awareness of pain and anger—you can call it the destruction of the self—was an integral part, that duality. Things get split up right in the middle, which I was very much interested in at that moment in my life."[7]

In 1974, Spero chose to focus on themes involving women and their representation in various cultures. Her *Torture in Chile* (1974) and the long scroll, *Torture of Women* (1976, 20 inches x 125 feet), interweave oral testimonies with images of women throughout history, linking the contemporary governmental brutality of Latin American dictatorships (from Amnesty International reports) with the historical repression of women. Spero re-presented previously obscured women's histories, cultural mythology, and literary references with her expressive figuration. Rarely exhibited, *Torture of Women* was translated into book form in 2009.[8]

Spero manifested a desire for women to be a part of the art conversation. Spero's most mature work lives along the lines of a peinture feminine. This is when a woman is the subject as well as the "artistic consciousness".[9] Spero's open-ended, thought provoking compositions of ruthless uncomfortable subject matter was depicted in hangings and friezes. This is seen in *Helicopter, Victim, Astronaut*, made in 1968 of gouache and ink on paper.[9] Spero uses the crimes and assaults on women from all eras and cultures to provide intense and emotional imagery for her art and text. Political violence, sexism, and life-threatening situations that women endure are subjects she explored throughout her career, but especially in the 1960s and 19702.[9] These interests are evidence of Spero's conviction that "the personal and the political are indistinguishable."[10] Spero was influenced by Jean Dubuffet, Antonin Artaud, Simone de Beauvoir; and Hélène Cixous.[11]

Developing a pictographic language of body gestures and motion, a bodily hieroglyphics, Spero reconstructed the diversity of representations of women from pre-history to the present. From 1976 through 1979, she researched and worked on *Notes in Time on Women*, a 20 inch by 210 foot paper scroll. She elaborated and amplified this theme in *The First Language* (1979–81, 20 inches by 190 feet), eschewing text altogether in favor of an irregular rhythm of painted, hand-printed,

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and collaged figures, thus creating her "cast of characters." In 1983, Spero began using, in her large scroll paintings, an exuberantly vaginal female figure going by the name of Sheela-na-gig.[12] The acknowledgement of Spero's international status as a preeminent figurative and feminist artist was signaled in 1987 by her traveling retrospective exhibitions in the United States and United Kingdom. By 1988, she developed her first wall installations. For these installations, Spero extended the picture plane of the scrolls by moving her printed images directly onto the walls of museums and public spaces.

Harnessing a capacious imaginative energy and a ferocious will, Spero continued to mine the full range of power relations. In 1987, following retrospective exhibitions in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, the artist created images that leapt from the scroll surface to the wall surface, refiguring representational forms of women over time and engaging in a dialogue with architectural space. Spero's wall paintings in Chicago, Vienna, Dresden, Toronto, and Derry form poetic reconstructions of the diversity of representations of women from the ancient to the contemporary world, validating a subjectivity of female experience.[*citation needed*]

Spero expressed her art once in this way: "I've always sought to express a tension in form and meaning in order to achieve a veracity. I have come to the conclusion that the art world has to join us, women artists, not we join it. When women are in leadership roles and gain rewards and recognition, then perhaps 'we' (women and men) can all work together in art world actions."[13][14]

Nancy Spero died of heart failure in Manhattan on October 18, 2009.[15][16] She is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, New York.[17]

She was interviewed for the 2010 film *!Women Art Revolution*.[18]

Exhibitions [edit source]

Her works were exhibited:[19][20]

2018

- *Scenes from the Collection* (The Jewish Museum, New York, United States)[21]

2017

- *Maypole: Take No Prisoners* (Galerie Lelong, New York, United States)[22]

2016

- *Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago* (The University of Chicago, Chicago, United States)
- *Walk the Line: Drawing Thought in Contemporary Art* (Bernal Espacio Galería, Madrid, Spain)
- *Art From Elsewhere* (International Contemporary Art from UK Galleries Towner, Eastbourne, United Kingdom)

2015

- *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* (Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany)
- *Trio* (Galerie Lelong, Paris, France)
- *Love Affair With Graphics. From Albers To Vostell* (National Museum in Kraków, Kraków, Poland)
- *Women's Work: Feminist Art from the Collection* (Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, United States)
- *Art From Elsewhere* (Middlesbrough Institute of Contemporary Art, Middlesbrough, United Kingdom)
- *Revue 25* (Christine König Galerie, Vienna, Austria)
- *Remembering the Vietnam War* (The William Benton Museum of Art, Storrs, Connecticut, United States)
- *Normal Love* (Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich, Germany)

2014

- *What's In and What's Not* (Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, United Kingdom)
- *Artevida (Política)* (Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
- *The Shape of Things* (Jack Shainman Gallery, New York City, New York, United States)
- *Civilization* (Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, united Kingdom)
- *Draw Me a Sheep* (Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris, France)
- *L'Heure Des Sorcières* (Centre d'Art Contemporain de Quimper, le Quartier, Quimper, France)
- *Nancy Spero, The Body* (International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC), Ljubljana, Slovenia)

2013

- *AMERICANA* (Perez Art Museum Miami, Miami, Florida, United States)
- *Macho Man, Tell It To My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault* (Artists Space, New York City, New York, United States)
- *Etwas Eigenes. 25 Jahre Barbara Gross Galerie* (Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich, Germany)
- *1813. Asedio, Incendio y Reconstrucción de San Sebastián* (Museo San Telmo, San Sebastián, Spain)
- *Sweet Home* (Häusler Contemporary, Munich, Germany)
- *Memphis Social* (Apexart, New York City, NY)
- *Salon du Dessin 2013* (Galerie de France, Paris)
- *Feminist Art Then And Now* (Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States)
- *Nancy Spero: Towards Liberation* (Virginia Commonwealth University Arts, Anderson Gallery, Richmond Virginia, United States)
- *Nancy Spero: Cri du Coeur* (Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, United States)[23]
- *From Victimage to Liberation: Works from the 1980s & 1990s* (Galerie Lelong, New York, New York City, New York, United States)

2012

- *The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World* (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States)
- *Feminage: The Logic of Feminist Collage* (The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, Australia)
- *Die Frau in der Pop Art im Echo anderer Stilrichtungen* (QuadrART Dornbirn, Dornbirn, Austria)
- *Twisted Sisters* (DODGE Gallery, New York City, New York, United States)
- *Restless* (Adelaide International Gallery 13, The Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, Australia)
- *Spirits of Internationalism* (MuHKA Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp, Belgium)

2011

- *Body Gesture* (Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon, United States)
- *Neue Künstlerinnenräume* (K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf, Germany)
- *Leon Golub, Nancy Spero* (Galeria Pilar Serra, Madrid, Spain)
- *Heroines* (Museo Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain)
- *Pictures of the Body* (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States)
- *New Inventory* (Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, United States)

- *Nancy Spero* (Serpentine Gallery, Londres, United Kingdom)
- *Nancy Spero: Works Of The 1980s* (Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich, Germany)
- Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France

2010

- *Shifting the Gaze* (The Jewish Museum, New York, United States)[24]
- *l'Image et le Mot* (Galerie Chantal Bamberger, Strasbourg, Germany)
- *Love in Vein: Editions Fawbush Projects & Artists 2005-2010* (Gering & López Gallery, New York City, New York, Un,*tates*)
- *The Right to Protest* (Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem, Israel)
- *Woman in Motion* (Galerie Lelong, Paris, France)
- *Nancy Spero* (Musée National d´Art Moderne, Paris)

2009

- *Nancy Spero, Woman as Protagonist* (Museum der Moderne Salzburg Mönchsberg, Salzburg, Austria)
- *Nancy Spero, Un Coup de Dent* (Galerie Lelong, New York City, New York, United States)
- *Nancy Spero. Disidanzas* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo (CAAC), Sevilla, Spain)
- *Blue* (Studio Stefania Miscetti, Rome, Italy)

2008

- *Nancy Spero* (Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, United Kingdom)
- *Nancy Spero. Dissidances* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain)
- *Nancy Spero, Spero Speaks* (de Appel Boys' School, Amsterdam, Netherlands)

2007

- *Nancy Spero* (Normandie, Sotteville les Rouen, France)
- *Nancy Spero* (Galerie Lelong, Paris, France)

2006

- *Nancy Spero* (Franco Soffiantino Gallery, Turin, Italy)

2005

- *Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Nancy Spero* (Galeria Pilar Serra, Madrid, Spain)
- *Nancy Spero* (Crown Gallery, Brussels, Belgium)
- *Tattoo* (Overtones, Los Angeles, California, United States)
- *Toward the Future* (Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan)

2004

- *Nancy Spero* (Galerie Lelong, Paris, France)

2003

- *Nancy Spero* (Galerie Lelong, New York, United States)

2002

- *Nancy Spero, A Continuous Present* (Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Kiel, Germany)
- Galerie Lelong, New York, United States

2001

- *l'Image Parlée, The Spoken Image* (Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec)
- *Nancy Spero* (Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich, Germany)
- *Sheela Does Ramapo* (Ramapo College Art Galleries, Mahwah, New Jersey, United States)

2000

- The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States

1998

- Tate Gallery, Londres, United Kingdom
- Museo Jacobo Borges, Carcass, Venezuela

1997

- *Nancy Spero: Collages* (Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, United States)

1994

- *Nancy Spero* (Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, Sweden)
- The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, United States
- List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, United States

1993

- National Gallery, Ottawa, Canada

1992

- Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States

1991

- *Sky Goddess, Egyptian Acrobat* (Studio Stefania Miscetti, Rome, Italy)
- *Nancy Spero* (Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich, Germany)

1990

- *Nancy Spero* (Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany)
- *Nancy Spero, Bilder 1958 to 1990* (Der Ort internationaler Gegenwartskunst in Berlin, Berlin, Germany)
- *Nancy Spero, To Soar II*, March 1 - May 20, 1990 (Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA)

1988

- *Nancy Spero* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, United States)

1987

- *Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950* (Everson Museum, Syracuse, N.Y.)

1984

- *Nancy Spero, The Black Paintings* (The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago United States)[25]
- *Nancy Spero, MATRIX 72* (The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive)[26]

Honors [edit source]

2006

- Elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

2005

- Lifetime Achievement Award from the College Art Association[27]

2003

- Honor Award from the Women's Caucus for Art[28]

1995

- Hiroshima Art Prize (awarded jointly to Spero and Golub) from the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art[29]

1995

- Skowhegan Medal from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture

Media Appearances [edit source]

- Spero as herself, *Nancy Spero: Becoming an Artist* 2008 [30]
- Spero as herself, *Nancy Spero: Collaboration*, 2012 [31]
- Spero as herself, *Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror*, 2019 [32]

See also [edit source]

- Chicago Imagists
- Feminist art movement in the United States

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23. ^ "Nancy Spero: Cri du Coeur". *Worcester Art Museum*. Worcester Art Museum.
24. ^ "Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism". *The Jewish Museum*. Retrieved 2018-03-11.
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External links [edit source]

- Nancy Spero
- Obituary, NY Times
- Obituary, The Guardian
- Nancy Spero exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries 2011
- Pompidou Centre, exhibition: *elles@centrepompidou* [1] 2010.
- Interview with Phong Bui in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Jul/Aug 2008
- Nancy Spero, Christine König Galerie, Vienna, Austria
- Torture of Women at Siglio Press

v · t · e	**Feminist art movement in the United States** [hide]
	Feminist art · Feminist art movement · Women artists
Precursors	American Association of University Women (1881) · National Association of Women Artists (1889) · New York School of Applied Design for Women (1892)
Venues or organizations	A.I.R. Gallery · Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (Brooklyn Museum) · Feminist Art Coalition · Hera Gallery · Lesbian Art Project · National Museum of Women in the Arts · New York Feminist Art Institute · SOHO20 Gallery · tArt Collective · Woman's Building · Women's Art Resources of Minnesota
Exhibitions or installations	*Womanhouse* (1972) · *Three Weeks in May* (1977) · *The Sister Chapel* (1978–80) · *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007)
Films or documentaries	*!Women Art Revolution*
Publications	*Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977–1992) · *The Feminist Art Journal* (1972–1977)
Groups	subRosa · Guerrilla Girls · The Waitresses · Women's Caucus for Art · Where We At
Notable women	Lynda Benglis · Louise Bourgeois · Elaine de Kooning · Mary Beth Edelson · Helen Frankenthaler · Nancy Graves · Lila Katzen · Lee Krasner · Georgia O'Keeffe · Louise Nevelson · Yoko Ono · M. C. Richards · Rachel Rosenthal · Carolee Schneemann · Alma Thomas · June Wayne
Lists	List of feminist artists · Women in the art history field
	Feminist movements and ideologies

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Categories: 1926 births | 2009 deaths | Artists from Cleveland | 20th-century American painters | 21st-century American painters | American alumni of the École des Beaux-Arts | American women painters | American contemporary painters | Burials at Green-Wood Cemetery | Feminist artists | Members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters | New Trier High School alumni | School of the Art Institute of Chicago alumni | National Academy of Design members | 20th-century American women artists | 21st-century American women artists

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